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ABSTRACT

The Federal Government is America's largest employer and is expanding consulting opportunities for career development professionals. Increased Federal mandates for outsourcing have opened wide doors for the entrepreneurial-spirited career counselors and created new challenges for traditional methods of offering career services. As consultants who have worked with a cross section of Federal agencies for over 20 years, the authors provide key background information and a roadmap to help career counselors successfully pursue and deliver consulting services to the Federal Government. Specifically this paper addresses: steps to getting in the door, successful service delivery, a consulting case study, and recommended resources and references. (GCP)

Federal Consulting: Strategies and Tools for the Career Development Professional

by
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Chapter Fifteen

Federal Consulting: Strategies and Tools for the Career Development Professional

Jennifer B. Kahnweiler & Sue Pressman

Introduction

The Federal Government is America's largest employer and is expanding consulting opportunities for career development professionals. Increased Federal mandates for outsourcing have opened wide doors for the entrepreneurial-spirited career counselor and created new challenges for traditional methods of offering career services.

In addition, the unstable work environment that has been experienced by the private sector in the last decade is now affecting numerous Federal agencies as offices reorganize and employees are losing their jobs or being asked to apply for new positions. Career professionals are uniquely positioned to provide a wide range of needed services to this population. Many agencies seek career counselors, executive coaches, transition specialists, outplacement specialists, career related workshops, seminars, and training.

Our inherently changing government means that working with Federal employees requires constant renewal and study. Thus, providing career services to Federal employees is a good match for most career development professionals, who can be characterized as life long learners and natural change agents.

As consultants who have worked with a cross section of Federal agencies for over 20 years, we have learned some lessons along the way about gaining access and achieving success as consultants in the Federal Government. We will provide key background information and a roadmap to help you successfully pursue and deliver consulting services to the Federal Government. Specifically this paper will address: 1) Steps to Getting in the Door, 2) Successful Service Delivery, 3) A Consulting Case Study, and 4) Recommended Resources and References

Steps to Getting in the Door

The career counselor who owns his/her own firm or a consultant who aligns him or herself with a larger consulting firm both are excellent

candidates for pursuing government work. Whatever role you play it is critical to first understand the context and background of working with the Federal Government – your customer.

An Overview of Your Customer - the Federal Government

The Federal Government is a diverse group of U.S. citizens (citizenship is a pre-employment requirement) that work in every state and throughout our territories as well as in other countries and overseas. There are 15 executive or cabinet level agencies and hundreds of smaller agencies and offices.

According to the Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics Fact Book (2002), published by The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Federal Government employed approximately 2.7 million civilian workers in all of its branches including the U.S. Postal Service and The Department of Defense in the fiscal year ending September 30, 2001. The average age of all workers (55% were men and 45% women) was 46.5 years and employees averaged over 17 years of public service. For this same group, 89% were full-time permanent employees. The other 11 percent of the workforce worked part-time (3%) or intermittently (3%), and the remaining 5% were full-time workers but not in a permanent status position. White-collar positions made up 88% of the total number of jobs, which had an average base salary of \$53,959.00. The Federal Government adjusts its pay scale to reflect the differences in cost of living. For example, the Washington DC (DC, VA, MD, WVA) local pay adjustment saw an average *base salary* of \$68, 239.00. It is also interesting to note that while all the cabinet level agencies are based in the DC area, only 16% of the Federal workforce is actually located in or around our nation's capitol. However, 97% of our Federal workforce is within the U.S. And, at the end of the

Fiscal Year 2001, the two agencies employing the largest number of civilian employees were the Department of Defense (37%) and the Veterans Administration (13%). The rest of the Federal workforce (50%) was spread out among the other agencies.

Clearly, with the post-WWII baby boomer generation making up the majority of the Federal workforce and with retirement eligibility quickly creeping up, it might be safe to predict that professionals with a background in providing transition services and succession planning will be highly desirable over the next few years.

Three Important Government Initiatives to Know About The A-76 Circular

The Federal Government, the largest bureaucratic organization in our country, has been conducting the same routine business practices for generations. With each new administration there is some changeover, but for the most part, a job in the Federal Government meant a ticket to lifetime job security. This is no longer true. Shortly after September 11th, The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established. "President George W. Bush decided 22 previously disparate domestic agencies needed to be coordinated into one department to protect the nation against threats to the homeland" (<http://www.dhs.gov>). This decision had far reaching implications not only for the safety of our nation, but ultimately it was the kickoff of a new wave of expanded government reduction in forces and outsourcing.

The A-76 Circular is presently in the limelight.

"The Circular Number A-76 originally signed in 1966 and revised several times later, established Federal policy regarding the performance of commercial activities and implemented the statutory requirements of the Federal Activities Inventory Reform Act of 1998, Public Law 105-270. The Supplement to this Circular sets forth the procedures for determining whether commercial activities should be performed under contract with commercial sources or in-house using Government facilities and personnel" (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/circulars/a076/a076.html>.)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all facets of the A-76 Circular, the career development consultant would be wise to research this Federal policy because it is "the vehicle" driving much of today's Federal outsourcing. As a result, many positions that were once Federal are now being performed by the private sector which is eager to hire consultants and in some cases, *double dippers* (retirees who return to work and do not require benefits). In the cabinet level agencies as much as 15% of the workforce or positions is currently targeted for competitive outsourcing. This means if an employee is in an affected or targeted position, his/her options usually are limited to applying for another job within the Federal Government or in some instances going to work for the consulting company which now delivers the work once performed by an in-house or Federal employee. Career development consultants working with Federal employees in transition and/or the organizational survivor will be able to

better understand their client's situation and the feelings they are likely having against this backdrop of organizational chaos.

The Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU)

A second important and relevant government initiative established by the Federal Government back in October 1979, pursuant to Public Law 95-507, was the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU). "The Federal Government each year buys approximately \$200 billion in goods and services from the private sector, according to the House committee" (<http://www.washingtontechnology.com>). This is important because approximately twenty-three percent of all Federal contracts are deemed for small businesses. The OSDBU was tasked with fostering the use of small and disadvantaged businesses as Federal contractors. All cabinet/executive levels and many of the smaller agencies that offer Federal procurement opportunities have OSDBUs. The OSDBUs offer small business information on procurement opportunities, guidance on procurement procedures, and identification of both prime and subcontracting opportunities. This is one of the first resources to check when seeking government contracts. The Directory of Major Federal OSDBUs can be found at <http://www.sba.gov/GC/osdbu.html>.

The Small and Disadvantaged Business(SDB) Program and 8(A) Program

The Small and Disadvantaged Business (SDB) program and the 8(A) program are important in helping small start-up firms do business with the government. The SDB certification program assists businesses that qualify as socially and economically disadvantaged. There are specific criteria to meet these qualifications. The major benefit to SDBs is access to Federal contracts. The basis for certification is documentation of socially and economically disadvantaged status. There are clear guidelines on these qualifications which can be found at the SBA website (www.sba.gov). Simple web searches will lead you to extensive information on these programs.

Vehicles for Federal Contracting

The Federal Market Place

Doing business with the Federal Government requires knowledge about where to find business opportunities. FedBizOpps (www.fedbizopps.gov) is the Federal Government's single point of entry for viewing all

procurement opportunities and awards over \$25,000. There are several vehicles or methods of contracting with the Federal Government. Ultimately, the contractor's ability to write a strong proposal is one of the most pivotal steps in the process. This it can be extremely time consuming due to the amount of information often requested and should be taken into account in planning your work.

The Request for Proposal (RFP), The Request for Quote (RFQ), The Capabilities Statement

Proposals are written to respond to a *statement of work* for a particular product or service the government requires. Therefore, understanding the difference between an RFP, an RFQ, and a Capabilities Statement becomes critical. Of these three the RFP is the most comprehensive. It requires adherence to strict proposal guidelines, information on how and who will perform the work, a company capabilities statement, documentation of past performance, a cost quotation or business proposal, and often a company financial disclosure statement. Responses to RFPs become proposals which are sometimes limited in length, however as a general rule the larger the stakes, the more comprehensive the document. The RFQ is a request for your fees, includes an overview of your company and may include how the work will be performed. The Statement of Capabilities is documentation of your company's ability to perform the required work outlined in the statement of work. This should include your company's mission, key services, and résumés or bios of those key personnel to be included in the project. You may be asked to provide a Capabilities Statement in response to the RFP, RFQ or as a stand-alone document.

The Prime Contractor and Subcontractor

Two important ways a consultant can provide services in the Federal Government is through a prime contractor and/or a subcontractor. Prime contractors are responsible for ensuring that the work contracted for is performed by themselves, or in the case of large awards over a million dollars, the prime contractor usually has the role of setting up management processes that includes overall project management. In the case of most large awards the government has requirements that include subcontracting a portion of the work to additional companies. This is where new businesses or consultants can team with larger companies. One suggestion for the career counselor just getting started in Federal consulting is to associate with a firm or company that currently provides career assistance services or other related services to the Federal Government. This first step will help you get your foot in the door and gain visibility. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) lists the major prime contractors

on its website where you can find out names and addresses of people in key positions to contact.

Pay

In our experience the government pays the fair market rate for services. Therefore, knowing these rates becomes imperative in doing business with the government. This will put you in a strong position when competing with other firms. Increasingly, smart Federal contracting officers will shop around for the "best value." The best value is not limited to the lowest price, however if you are not in the ballpark, even though you may be the best overall choice you won't be competitive. Once you have been selected, make sure you get a signed contract with a procurement or purchase order number that spells out all the requirements. Today, most if not all government agencies prefer to pay their small contracts via Visa or MasterCard. You can contact any of the major commercial banks in your area for more information on setting up a contract.

Successful Service Delivery

Learning the Culture

Knowing about the government structure, policies and laws described in the previous section will provide you with a strong background in understanding your clients. Your credibility will be enhanced and Federal employees will more willingly seek out your services.

One way to also jumpstart your integration is to learn the basic terminology and acronyms used in the government. Understanding the more frequently used terms such as KSA's (knowledge, skills and ability statements), special preferences and SES (Senior Executive Service) positions, etc. (www.opm.gov) gives you a heads up when working with clients.

We also suggest you become familiar with the agency structure. Know the key mission, vision and major functions of the agency with which you are working. This information can be found on every agency website. We recommend you become familiar with classifications, occupational groups, job series and pay and grade systems and know what someone is referring to when they say they are "going for a Grade 14." Though it is impossible to learn all the ins and outs of complex government policies it is important to have resources with this information readily accessible in order to help your clients. Websites such as www.opm.gov and others listed in the Recommended Resources section will be helpful in this regard.

You will also be able to ask clients the appropriate questions about their career plans when you know how pay ranges work. On one of our recent projects, an individual aspired to move to an open job position that

was 3 levels and one grade above her current position. The consultant reviewed the position description and job announcement with the client and they both determined that she possessed the necessary qualifications. She decided to pursue the position and with her consultant's help created a strong set of relevant responses to the KSA's. She ultimately was successful in obtaining the job. The consultant's familiarity with the job announcement process and application options was helpful in providing needed direction to this client.

The Dynamics of the Client Population

We hesitate to make broad generalizations about any group. Yet we also have found common themes that emerge among the Federal populations we have served. As stated earlier, government employees represent a cross section of America. As a result, diversity is highly valued and stressed. Consultants need to appreciate differences and be comfortable working with people from a wide variety of ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds.

Individuals who work in government are often more at home in a structured, more predictable environment. They also appreciate having a steady income and good benefits but aren't typically motivated by money. Many of our clients have said that they originally pursued government work out of a desire to perform public service and for the job security that was promised.

As we discussed earlier, the safety net that was once associated with government employment is quickly fading. We are finding that Federal employees are responding to this change in predictable ways. They express all of the typical emotions associated with change, including shock, denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. Our own knowledge of the peaks and valleys of the transition process has been very helpful in supporting this client base. We also have found that in recent years individuals are increasingly receptive to career development and training services. It appears as though the impending uncertainty about their jobs has contributed to this readiness.

Succeeding in the Contractor Role

As government contractors we are asked to adhere to strict reporting systems, evaluations and other processes. Neglecting this attention to detail can result in delayed payments and unhappy customers. We have also found that contractors can make process improvement suggestions. On one large scale interviewing project our consulting team partnered with the personnel department to streamline paperwork, greatly improving

turnaround time. Knowing when to recommend changes and when to accept the rules is a critical competency for consultants

Consulting Case Study

The following case study will illustrate some of the tools and strategies we offered to a Federal agency which found itself in transition during the past year. A consolidation of this agency's regional offices from five to two locations prompted the need for our services. Our team obtained a contract with this agency to provide career transition services which included individual career counseling and workshops with its over 100 employees.

The employees, who were primarily professional and administrative in their roles, were given 12 months notice in advance of the change. They had the option to bid for jobs in the two remaining locations, move to temporary positions, leave Federal service and/or retire. Career counselors were assigned to each regional office. It should be noted that career transition services were offered as a benefit to affected employees and were completely voluntary.

At the conclusion of the program, agency evaluations rated counselor effectiveness and overall career transition assistance high. One critical measure of success was that the vast majority who worked with a counselor found suitable employment. After completing this project we had a chance to assess the additional variables that contributed to its positive outcomes.

1) Tangible assistance – Counselors provided individual assistance and workshop interventions on a variety of job search topics. We prepared for our work by studying revised job application forms and standards for job applications and coached individuals on writing effective KSA's and Federal résumés. Many of our clients had not interviewed for jobs recently so we conducted scores of mock interviews.

In addition, our knowledge of the private sector allowed us to provide suggestions for their job searches. We reviewed networking techniques and encouraged our clients to use them in their job searches. Counselors also assisted clients with their career decision-making as they weighed the pros and cons about relocation choices and job offers.

2) Communication and Trust – We acted proactively with the contracting officer, Headquarters staff, on site HR professionals, and regional managers whom we considered our stakeholders in the success of the project. We also stayed on top of upcoming announcements and policy changes that impacted our clients by remaining in the communications

loop with all of these stakeholders. Most importantly, we spent time on site so that we were able to build trust. Midway through the project we found that there was a lag in employee participation. By contacting the HQ Workforce Development team we were able to work out collaborative ways of increasing service utilization. At an agency staff meeting an influential manager gave a testimonial on the personal benefits she had gained from receiving career assistance. Enrollment in the program rose by 30%.

Confidentiality was always reinforced to the clients. In some cases, friends and co-workers were bidding for the same jobs. They didn't want team members "knowing their business." Appointments with the career counselor were therefore managed in a highly discreet manner.

3) Challenges – Against this climate of uncertainty we encountered natural resistance to change. Career counselors provided a safe place for people to vent their emotions so they could then get on with their job search. We also did our best to provide reframing and hope. We did, however, know the limitations of our role and in several cases, referred individuals for outside personal counseling assistance provided through the EAP program. While EAP is usually a separate function from any kind of career transition program it is a good idea to get to know the EAP counselors for the purpose of referrals.

In the beginning, many of our clients misunderstood our role and expected job placement rather than counseling services. After we explained our services most were able to then work with us effectively and asked for our help.

Summary

The strategies and tools for Federal consulting offered in this paper were compiled and offered based on the extensive Federal contracting experience of both authors.

Practical suggestions and advice for the career development consultant first focused on steps to getting in the door. Since knowing your customer is critical in any business, selected demographics of the Federal workplace were presented. Government initiatives receiving wide attention throughout the government today are the Department of Homeland Security, the A-76 Circular, the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization and the SDB and 8A Programs. Widely used vehicles for contracting with the government were identified that included information about the Federal Market Place and critical documents needed to do business with the government including the Request for Proposal (RFP), the Request for Quote (RFQ), and the Capabilities Statement. The role of the prime and

subcontractors were detailed as well as the importance of knowing about fair market fees and how to get paid. The elements of successful service delivery were then highlighted. First hand experiences and observation about the Federal government as a culture and the dynamics of the client population were shared as well as strategies for success in the contractor role. A case study of a career consulting project was presented which demonstrated how tangible assistance was offered and received, that communication and trust were imperative, and how challenges were met and overcome.

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Recommended Resources

Websites

www.firstgov.gov—the official U.S. gateway to all government information and a powerful search engine that connects with all government agencies and government information.

www.opm.gov - The Federal Government's Human Resource agency, the Office of Personnel Management, with comprehensive information on jobs and human resource policies.

www.sba.gov - Information provided by the Small Business Administration

www.usajobs.opm.gov - The official job site of the U.S. Government. It is operated by the Office of Personnel Management and has a database and job matching service, résumé creator and e-mail alerts on available jobs.

www.fedjobs.com - A site run by the Federal Research Service which includes a database and career information resource.

www.fpmi.com - A site run by FPMI, a part of the HR Solutions and Staffing Division of Star Mountain, Inc. Human resources information and resources.

www.resume-place.com - Tools to help with all aspects of the Federal job application process.

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